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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Alvin "Gene" Collins
Meredith Ferguson
Ames, Iowa
5-6-2011**

Meredith Ferguson: Okay. We're recording. This is Meredith Ferguson. I'm interviewing Gene Collins. The date is May 6, 2011. The time is around 12 PM. The interview is taking place near his apartment in Ames, Iowa. Before we start,

Gene could you give me your full name and where you currently live.

Alvin “Gene” Collins: Full name and what?

Ferguson: Your full name and where you currently live.

Collins: My name is Alvin “Gene” Collins and I live here in Ames, Iowa at 4901 Todd Drive.

Ferguson: Thank you. The interview is part of the Iowa Department for the Blind’s History of Blindness in Iowa, Oral History Project. Gene, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Collins: Yes, you do.

Ferguson: Okay, thank you. To start off, could you give me your age and where you were born and raised?

Collins: I’m 61, and I was born in Humboldt, Iowa.

Ferguson: Okay. Born and raised in Humboldt?

Collins: Yeah.

Ferguson: Okay. Do you have any siblings?

Collins: I have, well, now its two sisters and two brothers. I have two sisters. I actually had four sisters, but two of them are now passed away.

Ferguson: Okay. Are you the only one that is blind out of those siblings?

Collins: Yes.

Ferguson: Okay. Could you explain how long you've been blind and what caused it?

Collins: I have retrolental fibroplasia, and so I've been blind since birth.

Ferguson: Okay. Are you completely blind? You have no sight at all?

Collins: I have a bit of light perception, but I might as well be totally blind for all practical purposes.

Ferguson: Okay. My first question, I was just wondering where you went to grade school?

Collins: I went to the school for the blind in Vinton.

Ferguson: You did? Okay.

Collins: Kindergarten through high school.

Ferguson: Through high school? Could you tell me a little bit about your experience at the Vinton School? Did you like it? Did you feel like you got a good education?

Collins: Well, it was by and large a positive experience. There were some things there of course, that I didn't like. I

felt they had some people there who had no business working with kids. But other than that my education, I felt, was reasonable. While I was there, I participated in Band and Track and Wrestling and other extra-curricular activities. And, of course, I made lots of long-time friends; lifetime friends I should say. They continue to be friends to this day.

Ferguson: That's good.

Collins: All and all it was a positive experience.

Ferguson: Okay. Did you feel like you learned a good amount of skills while attending the Vinton school?

Collins: Well, I...probably the most two critical, well, actually three critical things I learned there was Braille, and a little bit of cane travel, and my listening skills. I actually learned quite a bit while I was there, but I guess, probably the most important thing I learned while I was there, to be independent. Not so much independent of having all the skills that I needed, but the mindset that whatever I set my mind to do I can do. I needed to have that touched up a bit later on, but basically, you know, when you're taken away from home when you're five years old and you're thrust into a completely strange environment, you learn very quickly to survive on your own. You know, kids can be, kids can be really cruel to each other.

Ferguson: Oh sure.

Collins: You soon learn that there's nobody that's going to look out for you except you. So, that was probably the most important thing I learned while I was there; in addition to certain academics skills and what have you.

Ferguson: Okay. Did you go to public school at all?

Collins: No, no. I went kindergarten through high school at the school for the blind.

Ferguson: Do you remember what years those were?

Collins: '55 through '69.

Ferguson: Okay. So, how did you become connected to the Department?

Collins: Well, when I was I think about a junior in high school, I think about a junior in high school, the, then Iowa Commission for the Blind, sent a team of people up to talk to us about it. They came back my senior year. I kind of realized that after I graduated, I really didn't know what I wanted to do with myself. And so, I needed time to find myself. And I decided the Orientation Center at the Commission would give me a chance to explore some things before I decided what to do. And so, in July of '69 I entered the Orientation Center and I was there until March of '70, and then I...On termination there, I started school at the Western Iowa Tech over in Sioux City. I started school as a machinist. That was, like, a one year course, and I got through that and then in '1972. With the help of Diann Weinman, who was then a Counselor at the Commission, I

managed to get hired by United Hydraulics up in Hampton, Iowa. I worked there as a machinist for ten years. After that, I got laid off then.

With the help of Melvin Bobo, who was the Counselor for the Hampton, Iowa area, I managed to get accepted at Control Data. The Commission and Polk Rehab had a joint pilot project where they put several through a computer programming and operations course, and that was about a six-month course. After that, with the help of Mr. Bobo, I finally got hired down here at Iowa State University, where I worked for 25 years. I retired last, a year ago February. I worked there for exactly 25 years.

Ferguson: And, what did you do there exactly?

Collins: I was a technical consultant. I was one of the people who if you were a student, or a faculty member, or staff member having a computer problem, we had a help line that you could call. And you would get one of us and we would listen to what your difficulty was, and then help you figure out how to solve it.

Ferguson: Okay. Did you like that?

Collins: Oh yeah. It was great fun. It was a blast.

Ferguson: Yeah?

Collins: To this day, I have a small computer network in my house. And I learned a lot about computer networking, and just computers in general. I've probably learned as much again after starting to work there as I had by attending

Control Data. You get all these odd questions thrown at you. One of the important things I learned, as a consultant, is it's okay to say, "I don't know, but I'll find the answer for you." You take their number and bow off and research the problem, and come back and say, "The answer is that you went into this thing and you changed that, and you really shouldn't of ought to have done that." It was a great time. I made lots of good friends while I worked there; still have a pretty positive relations with several people there.

Ferguson: Good, good. Do you...So overall working at ISU was a positive experience?

Collins: Oh yeah! Yeah, it was probably one of the best things that happened to me in my life was getting a job and working there.

Ferguson: Did you ever...On the job, did you ever run into negative attitudes towards your blindness, or your ability to do the job?

Collins: No. There were some minor things where people had ideas that I couldn't do this or couldn't do that; nothing that was insurmountable, nothing where I couldn't reason with people. I did run into prejudice, but you're going to run into that in society in general. Fortunately, I had really reasonable bosses while I was there, and so they helped keep that sort of thing to a minimum. The people I ran into that didn't understand things were not in the chain of command, if you will. So, what they thought really didn't matter if the boss said, "You're going to do this." I was the

one that did it. I really didn't have too much trouble with that sort of thing.

Ferguson: Good. Going back to when you were a machinist, you said you got laid off? Was it...Was that they just needed to lay certain jobs off, or was that in any way connected to your blindness?

Collins: No, that was just back in the Reagan era. I was laid off in `1982, and the economy was like it is now--in the wastebasket. They were eliminating people, and they basically didn't have orders to keep the machine that I was working with supplied with work. They were just eliminating people.

Ferguson: Okay.

Collins: It was just my time to leave, I guess.

Ferguson: What did you do while you were a machinist? Was it a factory?

Collins: It was factory work. We built hydraulic cylinders and I worked, I started working in a drill department and drilling out valve bodies that would get bolted to the bottom of the hydraulic cylinders. Later on, I moved up to running a Truitt wave, and I was making bottoms for hydraulic cylinders. Then, there was a time when they converted that machine over to making the quartz that connect the hoses to the cylinders; so I did that. Then, there was a long time where I was running a milling machine that did nothing but

mill cotter key slots in the top of the nuts that bolted the pistons onto the cylinder.

Ferguson: Okay.

Collins: I did a lot of different stuff while I was there. I worked in their deburring department, taking sharp edges off of parts so they could be assembled without cutting the people's hands; the threads that were needing to work with them. So yeah, I really did a wide variety of things while I was there.

Ferguson: Were there any...while you were a machinist, were there any specific techniques that you used to, I guess, to accomplish your job? Did you do anything different?

Collins: Well, other than my adaptive tools. I had my Braille Micrometer and a Rotomatic, and a couple of tools that I had made while I was in Tech School that were really helpful. But other than that, no there wasn't anything special that I did different than anybody else. I couldn't read the blueprints, but the supervisor would come over and he'd say, "Well, you've got this order; somebody needs pieces and they're such-and-such diameter, and they have this configuration of tolerance, and we need a hole here and a hole there. This one has to be a pipe thread, and that one has to be a three-quarter inch tap hole..." He would just describe to me what it was. The fun part was that I had to set up all my own machines in order to do the production. It wasn't just, "Here, we've set this up for you; produce these parts." I actually had to set the machine up and make sure

that it was holding tolerances and producing parts to spec. That was a lot of fun. That was probably the most enjoyable part of the job.

Ferguson: Yeah, it sounds really involved. Okay. Going back to your technical job at Iowa State, what kind of...I'm assuming that you used computer programs of some kind to do your job for accessibility?

Collins: Yeah, I started out using Ron Hutchinson's "The Enhanced PC Talking Program." The first computer I had was a DOS machine. It was an IBM XT. When I look back at that I think about...That thing, at the time, had 256k of RAM and a 10-megabit, a 10 meg hard disc. Excuse me, not megabit; a 10MB hard disc, which I thought was really huge and everybody else thought, "Oh wow, you'll never fill that thing up;" last laugh.

15:00

Collins: It's kind of an axiom of computing that software and data will expand to fill all available resources. So it...by the time I left...Well, obviously after a while...I had a friend came to visit me who brought along Larry Cucon's "ASAP" program. That was probably one of the best screen readers for DOS I ever used. That thing was just incredible. There was almost no software that it couldn't handle. Then, of course, we moved on to Windows. I ended up...I started out using Larry Cucon's "ASAW" program. "Automatic Screen Access for Windows" is what it stood for, and I used that for awhile. It was still under development.

Then one day, a guy who became a very good friend of mine from the University of Western Ontario, came on the mailing list that I was on. And he said, “Hey, I have this screen access program for Linux that I would like somebody to help test.” I had always been fascinated with the Linux site; I had a couple of AT&T 7300 computers at home that were Professional Linux computers. I had begun learning about it. So, I downloaded and installed Linux and tried his screen reader program and I’m like, oh wow, access from the system console! I’d never had that before, which means I had complete and total access to the system. So, I went back onto the list and I said, “Hey, you guys ought to try this. This is really great stuff. It’s offered free and the operating system is free.” I was sold. I basically dropped using Windows and moved over to the Linux. I still did quite a bit of consulting about Windows, but I was also kind of the one of the go to people in the Tech Support area for Linux questions. I’m still using it to this day. I refuse to use Microsoft stuff anymore. I still use Linux.

Ferguson: Okay, very nice. Could you tell me a little bit, do you use any devices on a daily basis?

Collins: Oh several. I have a couple of those Hamilton Beach Chemo Talking Microwaves. So, I use those. I have a Power Braille Display that I use along with Speakup, which is the software that I run my Linux computers with; and it also uses, along with Speakup, which is the speech software. It has something called Braille TTY that drives the Braille display. So, I have both speech and Braille access to my computers, which in my opinion, is the only way to do business because there are times you a...your

computer is reading something to you and you miss something, and you want to scroll back up the screen, but you don't want to interrupt the speech. Since the Braille display is independent of what the computer is speaking, you can scroll back up and go, "Oh, I missed that! That's spelled that way. Oh okay." So yeah, I use that.

And, of course, I'm a member of the Library of Congress with the Digital Talking Book Program. So, I have my Victor Stream and I have a Library of Congress player and I download...I've become addicted because I download all my books from their Bard's site, which means I don't have to bother anymore returning books to the library. Download books and if I like them, keep them; and if I don't, throw them away. It's a great program. I'm really glad they've converted. I wish that they could get more of the current books more rapidly, but they're doing what they can. It's a great program. I've fallen in love with it.

Ferguson: Well good. I've been hearing nothing, but positive things so far about that program.

Collins: Oh yeah. If you ever have an occasion to read talking books; being able to just download a book and put it on a player, and not having to worry about changing sides. Just start it reading, and just read. If you happen to fall asleep, just scroll back a couple of chapters and pick up where you left off; and having a player remember where you left off if you decide to stop reading for awhile. That's a really useful feature.

Ferguson: Very nice.

Collins: Oh yeah, but that's about the extent of my devices. I do have a Braille Writer, of course, and a slate and stylus.

Ferguson: Do you use your slate and stylus very often?

Collins: Not much. I'm discovering I don't even use my Braille Writer very often anymore. What I am discovering is with the computer, I can get pretty much anything I want and I can read it in Braille, or I can have it read to me. I am a baptized Christian, and I do sermonettes at church. Since I have a Braille printer, I can print out my sermons and take them and give my sermonettes. And it all works pretty well.

Ferguson: Good. Let's see, have you ever belonged to any organizations for the blind over the years?

Collins: I used to belong to the National Federation for the Blind up until about 1980, when Mr. Jernigan and Mr. Taylor had their big dispute. At that point, I got totally sick of the politics and my wife just asked me, "Why are we involved with this?" And I said, "Well, you know, you're right. Neither one of us needs the hassle." So, I just sort of dropped out. I still kind of follow them, but I'm not as much of a zealot as I used to be. I've come to pretty much despise politics in all of its forms.

Ferguson: Okay. So you don't belong to any organizations, right?

Collins: No, I don't belong to any organizations now.

Ferguson: And it was just...it wasn't 'cause of the philosophy so much. But you just got tired with the business and politics of it?

Collins: Yeah, it was just...it had nothing to do with the philosophy; it was just the politics that turned me off. I still subscribe to the philosophy. I find it very helpful and very useful, but I'm on that. And having been baptized, I now keep the seventh day Sabbath, which the NFB...everything they want to do happens on the weekend. And so, it's either a choice of keep the Sabbath, or participate with them. I'm from a firm opinion that I should be keeping the Sabbath. There are religious reasons involved also.

Ferguson: Okay. Let's see, you mentioned you have a wife?

Ferguson: Yeah. My...I married Barbara back in 1974. I had been...Shortly after I moved to town, my Counselor, Diann Weinman said, "Well, there's this guy here in town that you have to meet; him and his wife." I went over to their house for Sunday dinner and Barb was there. She was Joann's, Jerry's wife. Her name was Joann and Barb was her sister.

Ferguson: Okay.

Collins: We met and we kind of got acquainted. Then she kind of went away and went back to Clear Lake, and didn't hear from her for a whole year. Then it came around to my birthday, which was May 4th, by the way. I just turned 61.

Ferguson: Well, congratulations!

Collins: Well anyway, she came back for the birthday party and we started dating, and we decided to get married. I did not know until when she came back, that she was in a wheelchair. We started dating and got acquainted. And so, we got married in '74 and then in 1989 she passed away of ovarian cancer.

Ferguson: Oh, I'm sorry. So she was in a wheelchair. Was she sighted?

Collins: Yes she was. She was sighted. She could drive a car. Actually, we complemented each other quite well because things that she needed legs for I could do, and things I needed eyes for she could do. It worked out; a very workable relationship.

Ferguson: Well, there you go. Good. So the blindness, or her being in a wheelchair, did it ever present any challenges?

Collins: No, no we...like I say, we complemented each other very well. We would go places. She had hand controls in her car, so she would drive and we'd get someplace where there were steps and, well, that's not a problem. I'd just bounce her wheelchair up and down the steps and she, while I was pushing her, she would actually steer the chair just by pushing on one wheel or the other to kind of keep me going a straight line. It worked out very well.

Ferguson: Sounds like it did. Okay. Kind of going back to your involvement, are you involved with the community at all in general? You mentioned church was very important.

Collins: Well, I'm not so much involved in the community. I'm retired, and quite honestly, I'm enjoying my peace and quiet. (Laughter)

Ferguson: Nothing wrong with that. (Laughter)

Collins: I figure I worked that hard, I now have enough funds to give me a comfortable time. Back in 2006, I suffered a stroke. That took me about six months to recover from that. I'm still suffering from lingering effects from it. I'm now diabetic, and don't have all the energy I used to have. I just kind of take my life easy, and enjoy reading, and music and communicating with friends.

Ferguson: You mentioned you are now diabetic. I was just wondering is there...What kind of techniques do you use, I guess, to watch your blood sugar? And do you take insulin?

Collins: I have a Prodigy Voice Glucose Monitor that works quite well. I have a Mammoth Blood Pressure Machine that talks to me that reads my blood pressure. It all works pretty well. I have a friend, Sandy Ryan, who is a professional registered dietitian. When I was in the hospital recovering, they gave me a prescription for an ACCU-CHEK Advantage Meter and she just said, "Give me that." And she went to the drug store and just picked it up. Well, soon after that the ACCU-CHEK was going to quit making the Advantage Meter, and they were going to quit making the strips. And I heard about the Prodigy Voice Meter. It's interesting; ACCU-CHEK cost about \$620.00, and the Prodigy Voice, when I bought that was about \$64.00. So, the availability and an

inexpensiveness of the technology really changed just over the last four years.

So, now I'm able to...Plus, this is a lot faster for me. The ACCU-CHEK had a very faint beep. I actually had to wear a Walkman and put headphones on, and wear a microphone in order to hear the beep when I...to know when I got enough blood on the strip so it actually started testing. So it would beep, and you had to wait for a whole half-minute for it to analyze what was on the strip and what your reading was. Now, this Prodigy Voice thing, I put blood on the strip and it just says, "Now testing." About six seconds later it says, "Your glucose reading is..." It gives me the reading and I'm good to go. It's a much simpler procedure. And fortunately, with the diabetes I don't have to take insulin. I'm on an oral pill medication, and so I don't have to fiddle around with needles and syringes, and all that stuff.

Ferguson: That's good. Okay. Well, are there any other kinds of activities that you do for leisure?

Collins: No. I think that pretty much covers it.

Ferguson: Yeah? Okay.

Collins: I think that's pretty much it.

Ferguson: I've run through my list of questions. Is there anything else you'd like to add or talk about?

30:00

Collins: Well, only I guess that when I was in junior high and high school, the sports were a pretty big part of my life. I was out for track and wrestling. And getting to travel to other schools for the blind, and other public schools for wrestling meets and track meets kind of helped me with my independence streak, because you get thrown into some really odd and unfamiliar social situations. So, the competition was good; the socializing was good. It was well worth the time spent.

Ferguson: Good. Kind of speaking along those lines, like, being thrown into awkward social situations, do you feel that attitudes towards blindness have changed or evolved over the years?

Collins: Well, the attitudes have evolved. There's still some hostility out there. It's not as blatant as it used to be, but people are becoming more educated. I do sense that employers still have a long ways to go, because what...I am almost to the opinion that without the special help in finding jobs, an employer just won't give a blind person the time of day unless a Counselor says, "You should do this."

Just as an example, and this isn't even an employer; but I used to ride out to North Grand Mall on the bus system here in town all the time, and would go out there. This was after my wife Barb passed away. Just about every evening I would go out there and have supper. Well, there was this man who used to stand out there, and he'd see the bus come up and he'd see me get off. I'd hear him running and he was running ahead of me to catch the door and open it for me. I asked him, "Would you please not do that?" He's like, "Oh, I do that for everybody." And I said, "No, you don't. You just

feel sorry for what you perceive as the poor little blind guy.” I said, “Why can’t you just allow me enough self dignity and respect that when I ask you not to do something, you just get out of the way and leave it alone.” And he kind of went, “Oh, I never thought of it that way.” He walked off and I never saw him after that. I’m sure I hurt his feelings really badly by asking him not to be an annoyance.

A friend of mine has a saying that kind of applies. His saying is, “Why be helpful when you’re not?” And that’s basically...If a blind person asks for help, that’s one thing. If you want to offer, that’s fine. But if you’re told, “No” and you have the obligation to be courteous about saying “No.” But if you’re told no, just accept it. I’m not being helpful. So just go away, and leave it alone.

Ferguson: Okay. Well, is there anything else?

Collins: No, I think that pretty well covers it.

Ferguson: Yeah. Well, thank you very much for agreeing to do this interview.

Collins: You’re very welcome.

33:33

(End of Recording)

Deb Brix

July 17, 2011